4-25-1995

The Ritual of painting

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

The Ritual of Painting

by

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April 25, 1995

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To my parents, who like dusk inevitably
have informed my designs, and to Nina,
who in mythic terms is indeed the sought
for half which makes me whole.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank both Judy Battaglia and Judd Williams for their work not only on my thesis committee but throughout my tenure at RIT; their time and criticism have been integral to my personal and artistic development. I would also like to express my appreciation to Phil Bornarth for two years of worthy discussions and a still growing bibliography of art and art historical references. Finally, I would like to thank my chief adviser, Ed Miller, for his insights, guidance, friendship and balanced film reviews.

"You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don't know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don't know who your friends are, you don't know what you owe anybody, you don't know what anybody owes you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen."

- Joseph Campbell
The Power of Myth

Introduction

My thesis began to coalesce in the Spring of 1994 when I stretched my first triptych based on the golden mean and produced my first large landscape (Figure 1). I decided upon a title for the series, **Dusk Informs Our Designs (D.I.O.D.)**, that functioned on several levels: as dusk is a period of shifting light, it is a time which informs through shadows and filtered light our manifest designs (patterns or motifs); simultaneously, it is a time which can obscure the clarity of imposed structures and divisions, thus informing the often less obvious nature of our designs (intentions or schemes); finally, as a pun, Dusk **In Forms** Our Designs, it provides a self-conscious nod to the difficulties of successfully approximating any experience or philosophical stance in a plastic medium.

My focus on landscape emerged while living in the city of Baltimore, Maryland, where because of my urban surroundings my mind turned to the memories of more open spaces: my childhood spent in Massachusetts - a backyard bordering a pine forest; in Virginia - many weekend trips into the Blue Ridge Mountains; and in Kentucky - time spent on friends farms and horse farms. Collectively, these are both the more charming and most important reasons for my imagery; in their charm, they are beyond the scope of this paper, and in their primacy, they are too immense and

personal for exposition. Rather I want to discuss my process, my specific "ritual of painting" which involves not only the act of painting itself but my reading and reflection on the significance of this act.

I will begin and end by discussing the work itself, seven large triptychs and as many works on paper. First will come a description of format, scale and thematic intent, then a discussion of the importance of these three aspects in relation to readings and my own thoughts regarding the act of painting in its broader social context. Returning to the works, I will seek to expose my artistic influences both in terms of imagery and style as well as philosophy and content. In the same vein, I will then open the door to the critics and aesthetes in order to place myself in some kind of art historical context. Finally, I will review my work as it is informed by all of these influences and conversations, whether internal or external, whether in relation to a grand vision or to my interest in a particular spot of green against a peculiar grayish rose.

The Work - Descriptive

The basis for the proportioning of the large triptychs stems from an independent study in drawing in which I explored linear and proportional systems and produced a series of drawings based on the golden proportion or Fibonacci's number (Figure 2). The three panels of the triptychs combine to produce a golden rectangle: 66 1/4" x 71 1/4", 31" and 5" equals 66 1/4" x 107 1/4" which approximates the golden proportion of 1 to 1.618.

I resonate toward this parameter for two main reasons. First, Fibonacci's number permeates nature and classical architecture and, in so doing, takes on something of the character of a Jungian archetype which therefore inevitably evokes recognition and response from the human collective conscious.[1] I firmly believe in such archetypes. Indeed, my preference for the landscape speaks to such a response on my part. Second, I find such a formal restriction analogous to working within poetic forms (English sonnet, Italian sonnet, haiku, etc.). With any of these classical forms, there remain numberless possibilities because human language and creativity are infinitely malleable. In the same sense, while the triptych panels allow for only six different

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[1]Jay Hambidge. **Elements of Dynamic Symmetry.** (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1926), pp. xi-xvii.

combinations, what can be produced with the language of painting upon those six variations is endless. Moreover, working within a certain poetic form challenges the poet to find just the right combination of words to express his or her intent within an expected rhyme scheme. The poet Marianne Moore often would let her first lines dictate the rest of the poem's meter. Similarly, I appreciate the challenge of producing different yet successful paintings within the confines of identical dimensions. To take the poetry analogy a step further, just as most touchstone poems are drawn out of the context of a collection, I see my triptychs as individual statements drawn from a series. Although, one or two may stand out as more striking, each in combination makes an integral contribution to the overall impact of the series.

Thematically, the panels have begun to serve more and more as a structural metaphor. Much of what I want to explore in my work has to do with the human need for structure and order. I began by trying to devise a symbol for this desire to structure (Figure 4, panel 2), but I soon found that my landscape references and this symbolic, box-like structure did not mesh. What began to emerge, however, was an overt use of rhythm - both graphically in terms of vertical bars (first suggested by the dimensions of the narrow panels) and as established by the spacing between the panels. I began to view the canvases as the necessary

"structures" on which and in relation to I then made landscape statements. This revelation that my materials could carry meaning in and of themselves will be discussed further in the body of this thesis.

Many of my moments of insight have come while involved with the works on paper. I have always done preliminary work, mostly charcoal and pastel studies, which I then translated into oil on canvas. However, unlike my triptychs, I never set any parameters as to size or proportioning for any of my paper pieces, and I ceased looking at them as exact studies to be simply enlarged. Indeed, this more casual approach may explain why the paper works have served so effectively as catalysts for new discoveries. I still approach my canvases with a greater sense of respect than a 22" x 30" piece of Arches cover stock. By the same token, it takes much less effort to lay down five vertical strokes and a horizontal dash with a bit of charcoal on a piece of paper than to do the same in oils on a 5 1/2' x 9 1/2' stretch of canvas.

The paper works address the same human/structure versus organic/flux themes as my paintings, yet because of the difference in materials -- pencil rather than brush, pastel rather than paint -- a different character emerges. The drawn line carries with it an impression of human involvement which in my paper works is less refined and more immediate than is evident in the brush stroke; likewise, the

collaging speaks of a tactile response absent in the large painted, atmospheric shapes on canvas.

At present the works on paper in tandem with the paintings speak to aspects of the issues with which I am concerned. Although the more gritty surfaces of the works on paper address this issue of human involvement and manipulation, the more austere surfaces and tones of the paintings reflect that quality of my experience when trying to attune myself to the guiding rhythms of the "stuff" of the world from which we emerged.

The dichotomy in my approach to different mediums finds its parallel in my somewhat opposing sets of imagery (representational/abstract), and such an interplay of dynamics necessitates a series in order to approximate the scope of my experiences/visions. Individually, each piece cannot begin to capture the overall thrust of my investigation of the human structuring/natural order interaction. Collectively, however, the paintings and works on paper initiate insight into the larger conclusions I hope to draw. Collectively, they begin to tell the story of my explorations.

The Importance of an Implied Narrative

Elie Wiesel opens his novel, **The Gates of the Forest**, with the story of a rabbi who must try to avert a pending disaster by means of a special prayer to God. But because the occasions to use this special prayer have been few and far between, this particular rabbi no longer knows how to find the sacred place in the forest or what needs to be done in the ritual or even the specific words of the prayer. All he knows is the story of how this prayer has saved his people time and again in the past, so he sits in his study and repeats to God the story . . . and the disaster is averted. The parable ends by affirming that "God made man because he loves stories."[2]

In a sense, humans interact only in terms of stories. Our daily lives are filled with a constant relating of events. Even the answer to "How are you?" often entails a beginning, a middle and an end. The triptych format has enabled me to introduce this essential element of a narrative. No matter where you begin viewing, you eventually have two other panels to relate to the one that first caught your eye. The space between the panels then might provide a reflective caesura or, in their inch-wide

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[2]Elie Wiesel, **The Gates of the Forest**. Translated by Frances Frenaye. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1966), introductory remarks-no pagination.

thinness, hurry the eye onto the next canvas. Across these panels emerge the imagery which at times reinforces their structure or counterbalances it.

The triptych format also carries a symbolic importance which I did not intend but which works well in spirit relative to some of what I hope to convey through my painting. Three is a mythic number. It is the smallest creative set: the mother, father, and offspring. Matisse wrote, "I re-enter through the breach - and reconceive the whole."[3] In discussing this quotation, Brandon Taylor suggests that Matisse's method can be seen as a kind of fertility rite where the artist and the muse within unite to produce the painting.[4] Motherwell wrote of the artist's triangle as constituted by oneself, the medium, and human culture: a more sophisticated version of the artist, the art, and the audience.[5] Whether all these triads and the issues they raise emerge when facing one of my triptychs is doubtful. Nevertheless, three is a potent cross-cultural symbol that, I assume, provides a certain familiarity and comfort for the viewer which in turn serves my desire to communicate my experience.

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[3]Brandon Taylor. **Modernism Post-Modernism Realism: A Critical Perspective for Art** (Winchester, England: Winchester School of Art Press, 1987), p. 32.

[4]Taylor, p. 32.

[5]Robert Motherwell, edited by Stephanie Terenzio. **The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 180.

Just what that experience is I cannot exactly say, but I know it involves my belief in and, to a large extent, my dependence on something greater than me, something primal and harmonious. In **The Power of Myth**, Joseph Campbell discusses a notion of "planes of consciousness" in the biblical story of the life before and after Eden. The unity of Eden transcended the world of duality and opposites which was the result of knowledge (sin). Many of the spiritual quests of humans have to do then with reestablishing some connection with this transcendent unity.[6] To a great degree, this describes my situation.

In trying to explain my art in terms of a response to this separation from a transcendent unity, I stumbled onto the term praxis, which is used in liberation theology to describe a constant involvement of action and reflection; in theological terms, praxis is not a search for correct thinking or "orthodoxy" but an intermingling of thought and action or "orthopraxis."[7] Likewise, I am not looking for the right school of painting but the best way of painting which, for me, involves quite a bit of reflection as well as a lot of time simply manipulating the medium. Moreover, this notion of orthopraxis allows me to reconcile wanting both a clearly thought-out, logical art as well as a more

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[6]Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers. **The Power of Myth** (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 48-49.

[7]Deane William Ferm. **Contemporary American Theologies: A Critical Survey** (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), p. 63.

emotional or spiritual experience with the materials.

I am not the center of my art. I therefore look to avoid over-stressing my "immediate personal experience to the exclusion of intellectual substance" - which is how the evangelical movement is described.[8] As an artist, why speak in tongues when you can bring the same vibrant belief to bear in a more intelligible/approachable translation of personal experience? Why wallow in self-centered babble when you can truly share or truly attempt to share? Because even if the sharing fails, the gesture toward communication stands as an affirming action in tandem with the action of image-making.

The issue of communication remains a central concern. Gone is the culture where, as described by John Pfeiffer:

> The individuals who drew the forms on the wall knew exactly what they were doing, and the individuals who came to look knew exactly what the forms meant.[9]

Yet, the impetus to continue producing art remains, and this, I believe, addresses a more essential issue - what value has art in today's society. In discussing the Upper Paleolithic era, Pfeiffer raises the issue of what cultural rather than biological value art had in terms of the development and continuation of the species.[10] Before

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[8]Ferm, p. 108.

[9]John E. Pfeiffer, **The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion.** (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p.134.

[10]Pfeiffer, p. 73.

reading this, I firmly believed that art has an adaptive value. The faculties called upon to create or to enjoy art are the faculties which separate us from all other creatures. Even though we have evolved to a point where art is seemingly no longer essential, I am not convinced that this is as it should be. I believe art may be the only means to further evolution beyond the curious masters we are.

Ideally, ethical decisions should arise from the simultaneous awareness and appreciation of all facets of an issue and all consequences of a decision/action. Lacking omniscience, one must strive to empathize with as many perspectives as are available; moreover, one must work to make them available. The righteous complacency of any notion of a single, superior world view must be combatted, because while doctrine can be learned by rote, morality remains an act of creative autonomy. Without sacrificing the nurturing aspects of culture or challenging cultural identity, there needs to be a means of fostering open-mindedness. What is needed is an intermediary activity, one which transcends cultural dogmas and yet parallels the processes of morality, an activity which straddles the world of things (action) and the world of reflective thought (morality).

Art is such an activity since, with art, theory involves practice. The thinking skills that are described

abstractly when discussing morality are called into action when artistically engaged. Art goes beyond asking for simply an acknowledgement of the need for cultural sensitivity; it offers experience in modes of thinking directed at developing such sensitivity. But the community of humankind is no longer bonded as it once was. It is plagued by too many interests. What I hope is that my work is understood to address more essential interests.

The dilemma lies in this breach between what is said and what is understood. Joseph Campbell suggests that:

> The best things can't be told because they transcend thought. The second best are misunderstood, because those are the thoughts that are supposed to refer to that which can't be thought about. The third best are what we talk about. And myth is that field of reference to what is absolutely transcendent.[11]

This excerpt brings to my mind two points. First, abstract painting is literally a "field of reference." Abstract imagery is abstract because it attempts to get at something which cannot be depicted in imagery borrowed from the sensory world. It can only **refer** to the "absolutely transcendent," to that which cannot be thought and therefore cannot be said. Second, the spirit and nature of my imagery is at once recognizable and inevitable. It is recognizable in that it is easily pigeon-holed with the abstract expressionists and color field painters. It is inevitable

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[11]Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers. **The Power of Myth** (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 49.

because the nuances of my artistic quest coincide with that of the abstract expressionists and thus produce relatively similar images.[12]

What else is possible? Comparative mythology has shown time and again how similar the development of human understanding has evolved no matter what the environment. This is because the questions are the same: What is birth? What is death? What is life? No matter how the characters are presented, the myths usually involve a state of ideal unity, transgression through knowledge and the subsequent suffering and joy that is the known human existence. Likewise, when I face the challenge of painting through my relationship with this world spirit, this fundamental truth, my imagery will correspond at some level with any number of artists involved in asking the same questions -- because even though the artists are distinct personalities, the entity with which they look to commune is the same. Thus, it follows that some essential aspect of that experience would emerge as a constant -- nevertheless, addressing a universal truth does not insure being universally understood.

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[12]I think its safe to say that while the works of, say, Rothko, Motherwell, Still, and Pollock differ greatly in appearance, this group in comparison to Picasso, Braque, and Matisse or Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol clearly belongs to a unified camp. And my work, I believe, falls into that same camp.

The Work - Stylistic Influences

The work and writings of the Abstract Expressionists continues to be pivotal in my development, and I think that this stems from the aforementioned similarity of intent. Alwynne Mackie summarizes the dynamic between the Abstract Expressionist and primal subject matter:

> From a deeply felt need to use art to say things that mattered at a fundamental level of life, the artist gradually articulated a position where myth seemed the only vehicle capable of bearing that expression.[13]

As I continued to peruse Mackie's book, I found intriguing parallels between the development of the Abstract Expressionist philosophy and practice and much of my work. For example, Mackie explains that Abstract Expressionism has some of its roots in French Symbolism.[14] The Symbolists used symbols and the juxtaposition of disparate symbols to break down the normal course of logic and usher in a realization of fundamental truth. In these terms, my first triptych attempted to derive certain symbols which when juxtaposed would inform the viewer of a more fundamental relationship. I had my landscape reference, a box-like structure, and two colored bars which when combined should

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[13]Alwynne Mackie, **Art/Talk: Theory and Practice in Abstract Expressionism**, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 29.

[14]Mackie, p. 44.

have "said" something about human interaction with the natural world.

What I discovered as I began the second and third pieces was that my literal use of a symbol had its limitations - specifically the box-like structural symbol which was never repeated and then even painted out in **D.I.O.D. I** (Figure 3-first version I, Figure 1-final version I). Subsequently, my next two attempts focused on letting vertical bars, first suggested by the narrow 66 1/4" x 5" panel, stand on their own as metaphors for a human impulse for structure (Figure 4, Figure 5-first version III). This development away from some of my naive symbolism paralleled a more subtle understanding of symbol as expressed by Robert Motherwell, which Mackie quotes and which I had noted earlier in my own reading. In his essay "Beyond the Aesthetic," Motherwell writes:

> Feelings must have a medium in order to function at all; in the same way, thought must have symbols. It is the medium, or the specific configuration of the medium that we call a work of art that brings feeling into being, just as do responses to the objects of the external world.[15]

It is Motherwell's description of medium which began to be of importance to my thinking and painting. I paint on rectangular canvases. I build (structure) those rectangles and stretch the canvases. They are a structural metaphor. It finally became clear that my medium could provide a

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[15]Motherwell, p. 38.

substantial element of content, and although this seems obvious enough, and although I had heard this from my professors and had read the same:

> But it must be remembered that subject matter was not something that could be separated from technical means.[16]

it required my own evolution for this concept to manifest itself in my practice. I went back into **D.I.O.D. III** and pared down the imagery to a few essentials. In this work, the panels functioned conceptually in concert with their painted surfaces (Figure 6-final version III).

This realization in my process provides insight into the issue of how to balance a sense of tradition with the desire for originality. Most artists in this country cannot avoid this issue when the press and marketplace are driven by the latest, newest movement or splinter movement in the art world. But I have always accepted that there is nothing new under the sun, and therefore I have no problem with emerging from a tradition. Still, there remains a belief in the sanctity of the individual as well. This could be explained as simply resulting from my ego, the "I" through which all of my known experiences with the world must pass, and this "I" believes it has a voice unlike, although perhaps akin to, any other in the universe. Ultimately, tradition and originality are the inevitable duality following the mythic loss of unity. In mythic terms,

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[16]Mackie, p. 29.

although reality or truth is the same as it ever was, it is forever realized anew. This leads to an understanding that tradition and originality are temporal in nature, and this concern for notions of time are something that I have borrowed from the Abstract Expressionists and simultaneously made my own.

Mackie relates that in general the core group of artists making up the Abstract Expressionists agreed that a work was never finished, that a painting could always be re-entered and re-worked and while standing on its own merit after each revision could always undergo further changes.[17] Place this belief beside discussions of mythic time, that is sacred time (**kairos**) rather than profane or chronological time (**kronos**), and the painting is never done because it speaks to a continuum beyond human time. Plastic imagery suggesting such a continuum emerges in Rothko's large color-field paintings, in Pollock's implosion of the field/ground relationship, and in Kline's sweeping architectonic strokes. In the same sense, Mackie discusses Barnett Newman's philosophy of scale and total space. Newman believed that scale did not address the actual size of the piece but the "relative immensity of the event," total space as experienced by the viewer who feels the expansion within him or herself.[18]

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[17]Mackie, p. 88-89.

[18]Mackie, p. 161.

These are mythic issues, and I have found myself addressing the same temporal/spatial ambiguities in my paintings. **D.I.O.D. VI** (Figure 7) provides an example of my use of color borders and edges that approximate a continual state of flux. The relationship between the two main hues of deep blue and thick dusty green cannot be described in terms of a clear spatial relationship. Both colors pass over and through each other, receding into and emerging from the background. Much of this ambiguity is created through the close tonal relationship between the colors; they nearly have the same value. Moreover, while at times the shapes they create have clear edges, there are also borders that simply fade away. Mackie describes the "tension between incorporeality and the fixedness of the image" in Rothko's work.[19] Rothko's canvases suggest shapes that then defy sharp definition. This phenomenon is one reason why I pause to contemplate his work.

This state of flux between delineation and obscurity could serve as a symbol or metaphor of sacred time. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that literature is that which circumscribes a fundamental silence.[20] In this same sense and as Campbell describes the transcendent, painting is that which circumscribes the indescribable. My **D.I.O.D.**

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[19]Mackie, p. 199.

[20]Jean Paul Sartre, **What is Literature?** Translated by Bernard Frechtman. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 37-38.

VI and **VII** (Figures 8) speak to this level of connotation rather than to denotation. Even earlier in **D.I.O.D. II** (Figure 4), I have "windows" between colors where spatially the distinction between the foreground and background vacillates. When reflecting on the process - the choice and blending of colors, the manipulation of tonal relationships, and then their application on canvas - the spatial ambiguities arise independent of my intent. They, in essence, find their own harmony. This reality, which does not necessarily find its way into the viewers' awareness, nevertheless, speaks to my concern for the relationship between the human ordering factor and that Other which insists on its own order. To carry this point a step further, my "getting lost" in the act of painting, where the materials dictate the course a piece will take, answers for me other concerns regarding tradition and originality. I may be striding in footsteps made generations ago, but the pace I take and the effort I make is mine and mine alone. Although I may mimic another artist's brush work, the discoveries in exploring those marks are new. And if my intent is not a clever forgery, then something of my self-exploratory experience will translate into the work.

As discussed earlier, I rapidly abandoned the box-like symbol in favor of the structures suggested by the canvases themselves and the rhythm of repeating these verticals. **D.I.O.D. IV** and **Dusk Study IV** (Figures 9 & 10) offer two

examples of strong vertical rhythms. I studied rhythm and repetition while reading about classical landscape and artists such as Poussin whose carefully composed paintings orchestrate the movement of the viewer's eye. Certainly, my work with linear and proportional systems involved using scale relationships as a form of rhythm. Then there are the artists suggested for my investigation such as Donald Judd, whose work is an explosion of rhythm - of shapes, shadows, negative space, and their mutations as the viewer changes his or her perspective. With this background, it is no wonder I reasserted a rhythm with the clean, crisp bars in **D.I.O.D. IV**; and again later when I produced **Dusk Study IV**, although the bars were no longer as crisp, nor evenly spaced, nor set perfectly perpendicular to the horizontal, nor identical in width. The organic forms in **D.I.O.D. IV** have their own episodic rhythm which competes and, at times, obscures the vertical bars. In **Dusk Study IV**, the union of the two elements (structure and organic) takes on a new character, a bit more harmonious though by no means a complete marriage. However, by the time **Dusk Study VII** (Figure 11) emerged and subsequently **D.I.O.D. VII**, while the verticals continue to exist, they are now fully informed by an organic sensibility; rhythm is dominant but whether or not it is a structural or organic rhythm is perhaps in question - or simply in balance. What becomes certain is that my exploration of rhythm owes much to others' theory

and practice, but my resolution of rhythm is personal.

Color is a integral element of this resolution, and the development of my palette has its influences as well. Like most of the museum-going public in the U.S., during the 1980's I was bombarded by the resurgence of interest in the Impressionists. Most importantly, sometime late in 1984 or early in 1985, I went to see "A Day in the Country: Impressionism and the French Landscape" while on exhibit at the Chicago Institute of Art. The Impressionists' obsession with light and their pursuit of techniques which would successfully reproduce its qualities with pigments found a permanent home in my head. I find it a pleasing intellectual and technical challenge to attempt to capture in plastic form the spirit of light.

This investigation has continued concurrently within my thesis work and, to a great degree, has been integral in resolving each piece. My choice of "dusk" as a theme reflects an interest this eventful time of light and the natural rhythm around which we organize our lives. While my hues have remained within a certain range of earth tones - ocher, sienna, dusty greens and reds, dark blues - my experimentation with tonal variations has provided nuances which in turn subtly activate this muted palette. The fascination with the challenges of light that Impressionism inspired in me has proven to be a real creative catalyst.

My study of Cezanne's still lifes and landscapes, in

particular, show through in my more representational landscapes such as **D.I.O.D. I, II and V** (Figure 12). Cezanne explored the nature of structure in relation to light and shifting perspective.[21] In my first and second triptychs, I quite clearly initiate a change in perspective among the panels simply by shifting or erasing any reference to a horizon line. My intent was to introduce a notion of how heavy-handed our perspective can be in ordering up and understanding what we see. In my fifth triptych, however, I abandoned the simplicity of this gesture and, in response to a farm I had driven by on a day trip, I turned to the rectangle/trapezoid of the field as a structural metaphor and the stripes of a plowed field as compositional tool. Granted, Cezanne was interested in the underlying interrelationships of objects themselves - trees, rocks, forests and mountains - even to the degree of dividing the sky into interlocking, prismatic planes. In contrast, I am concerned with not only the structure of the objects themselves but the human tendency to objectify. Thus, **D.I.O.D. V** reorganizes the field and the plow ruts into a less recognizable order on the backdrop of a clear reference to the landscape in order to suggests a breach between alternate harmonies.

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[21]I respond more to Cezanne's sensibilities in this regard than to the Cubists. While I appreciate and certainly at some point may have been influenced by Picasso's work, his radical breakdown of shape and form goes in direction which do not parallel my interests.

Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism, or more specifically what I have taken away from these two "isms," have influenced my development the most. Admittedly, abstraction appears to integrate itself more readily with the formal issues posed by the triptych format. Some impulse within me, however, insists on the possibilities of more referential landscape imagery. That impulse, I believe, stems from a concern for my works' reception by whatever audience is out there, and the belief that somehow I can use referential imagery to lure the viewer into a more spiritual/abstract experience.

An Art Historical Context
(or from the Canine to the Sublime)

While a dog has the luxury to scratch every itch and attend to every tickle, I am too much of an existentialist to believe that I simply exist sans the responsibility accompanying thought and knowledge. And art theory can run the gamut between the glee of just making prints in the sand to a state of absolute social accountability. After digesting Brandon Taylor's book, **Modernism Post-Modernism Realism: A Critical Perspective for Art**, it becomes apparent that what separates these "isms" involves delineating just what artists should be doing for themselves in relation to what it is they owe to society.

Taylor moves from Romanticism (in which self-conscious artists first exercise choice[22]) through Modernism (in which heroic artists use technique as an expression of a subjective mental state[23]) into Post-Modernism (in which the de-centered artists reflect the absolutely unrelated fragments of their culture[24]). Although I live in a fragmented culture, I do not believe it is my lot only to reflect that fragmentation. I am a Romantic, although a

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[22]Taylor, p. 22.

[23]Taylor, p. 34.

[24]Taylor, p. 66.

cynical one, and I do believe that there is room for heroism, but I am also glad that we cannot go back because the freedom which the once out-of-power have found in the fragmenting of established hierarchies should not be sacrificed. Taylor describes how the feminists heralded the loss of authorship and painterly quality as "the death of male egoistical dominance."[25] Later, he discusses modernism in terms of specialization where numberless splinter groups have their own structure and organizations complete with newsletters, support groups and annual meetings.[26] The difficulty in broadening the cannon comes in maintaining its force and validity.

The list of factors contributing to the fragmentation of society is endless. In terms of communication or language systems, however, the beginning of much the modern investigation with underpinnings of social hierarchies began with the Witgensteinian notion of word games in which to name something is to control that thing. To a degree, the creation story of the Bible suggests the same when God grants to Adam, master of the world, the right to name all the creatures of Eden. Indeed, much of the speculation with cave art is that it was used in rituals intended not only to acknowledge the key players in the human drama and their spirits but also to usher in an element of control over

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[25]Taylor, p. 46.

[26]Taylor, p. 73-74.

these players with regard to future events (from the hunt to the afterlife).[27] Witgenstein steers us, however, toward transferring control from the human to its language. The Post-Modern aesthetic finds much truth in this condition as artists struggle with their materials as things in themselves.

In his book, Taylor writes of the extremes of Lacanian philosophy where:

> . . .language is no longer the expression of thought, . . . but thought is an "effect" of the language system.[28]

At this point, the Romantic in me steps forward and wants to reclaim dignity for the individual by reasserting the validity of the principle of free will.

Most if not all of the artists I know or have read about create alone. They go into their studios, they put on their favorite music or enclose themselves in silence, they have a special book or two there, they have their materials at the ready, their solvents, their pigments, their stuff, and they wait for inspiration or they begin to dabble until real inspiration comes and something new is introduced into this world already filled with objects. I do not believe this ritual is repeated time and again in support of or even in supportive acknowledgement of fragmentation. It is

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[27]Pfeiffer, Chapter 7: Special Places, Special Purposes, pp. 102-118.

[28]Taylor, p. 49.

repeated in the name of unity and wholeness.

Martin Buber's **I/Thou** describes and decries the plight of looking at anything (animal, plant or mineral) as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. I believe artists go through the ritual of creation in order to seek the **thou** of their materials, and through their creations try to reawaken this capacity in others. In his essay, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?," Langdon Gilkey argues for perceiving art as an "event of intrinsic worth" which reveals the "truth of the ordinary" and opens up "new venues of perception."[29] I find myself not only wanting to believe this but having to believe it because of my own experience. Like the rabbi who has forgotten the place, the ritual, and the words, the artist, regardless of subject matter, struggles to reestablish some line of essential communication.

Campbell describes the exile from Eden in terms of unity and fragmentation. He points out that our separation from Nature is our biblical inheritance since we were ordained to be the masters of the world.[30] Our culture does not acknowledge our inclusion in the world but our desire for supremacy over it. Therefore, much of the Post-Modernist sensibility is inevitable when from the beginning you were meant to be in charge of every-thing only to

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[29]Langdon B. Gilkey, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?" in **Art, Creativity, and the Sacred.** Edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1989), pp. 188-89.

[30]Campbell, p. 32.

discover that no-thing is truly within your control. Campbell goes so far as to describe Christ's transcendence not as an upward/outward movement but as a metaphorical journey inward into that unity within from which all emanates.[31] Likewise, I suggest that the artist's journey is not with regard to the outer world of things but rather an inner realization of unity with all things.

In Gilkey's phrase "truth of the ordinary," however, I see the Post-Modernists, and this admittedly causes some problems for my own aesthetic. Taylor describes modern art as a specialized and self-referential response to the demand of the new modern upper class, the urban intellectual willing to expand his or her perception to prefer a "crunchiness" over the soft, easy picture, at its core simply another aspect of modern, aggressive, oral consumption.[32] The artist, Georg Baselitz writes that:

> The artist is not responsible to anyone. His social role is asocial; his only responsibility consists in an attitude, an attitude to the work he does.[33]

The question arises as to how to reconcile such cold reductions from both the artist and his/her audience? Gilkey's pivotal word is "truth" in contrast to simply presentation. Rauschenberg and Johns, for example, deal

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[31]Campbell, pp. 54-56.

[32]Taylor, pp. 82-84.

[33]Georg Baselitz, "Four Walls and Top Lighting," in **Baselitz: Paintings 1960-83.** (London: White Chapel Art Gallery, 1983), p. 65.

with the truth of the ordinary, but I think the Post-Modern aesthetic as a whole (as described above) does lend itself to a simple indulgence in shock value or self-serving irreverence.

I react quite negatively to much of this "in your face" attitude: art which confronts you with personalized realities vying in competition toward an undefined end or toward no end at all beyond self-exposure and the human love of disclosure. I think most museum goers have come to enjoy being confronted with "crunchy" art because they always return to their soft lit homes, their warm dinners, their relative security when compared to the other 85-95% of the world's population. I think what might be more disturbing than harsh socio-economic realities beautifully presented in air conditioned salons are images aimed at the soul, aimed at something more fundamental than the trappings of modern life and its refuse.

Campbell makes an interesting point in discussing the nature of the creative experience. He suggests that the ideas and poetry of traditional cultures come not from the "folk" but from "the experience of people particularly gifted, whose ears are open to the song of the universe."[34] By extension, the fascination with the gritty by-products of our technological world is a return to this belief that the common material of the average Joe and Joetta is the stuff

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[34]Campbell, p. 85.

of art. If you agree with Gilkey and Campbell, this implies that artistic engagement with the materials of mass media and capitalism avoids the responsibility for its existence. Artists find a way to excuse themselves to work in concert with it and even augment it.

Conclusion: The Work
Critical Analysis - Overall Development

These two years have helped me clarify quite a lot about what it is I am doing or intend to do. I do not wish to augment an already fragmented, self-absorbed world. How and why then do I paint? I found some of my answers with Joseph Campbell:

> Myth must be kept alive. The people who can keep it alive are artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world.[35]

I read this excerpt in late March 1995 after all seven triptychs had been completed, but understanding and refining my theory has not reflected as much as I might have expected on my practice.

I have had to work very hard to lay some biases aside while at the same time I am glad to keep a few healthy and close. The relationship between form and content has slowly emerged to the forefront of my thinking and my work. Substantial changes have appeared in my handling of the triptychs and the works on paper. My understanding of rhythm and proportion has grown, and my sense of color and value has broadened; and these are my materials. I look forward to the point where I fully practice that form is "a description, an ordering, according to the needs of

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[35]Campbell, p. 85.

content."[36]

As a concluding counterbalance to much of the tone of this thesis is a quotation from an essay by Karen Laub-Novak:

> The quest may also be intoxicating. One may love the process more than the goal. One may center more on the questioning self than on transcending the self. It is easy for an artist to become enamored with the act of painting, the pursuit of fleeting images, the feelings and emotions that surround the moments of inspiration--and fail to complete the work. The quest becomes the goal.[37]

Such a critique flies in the face of most contemporary, process-oriented thinking, but she draws attention to the focus on the self. I think the self-centeredness in art is usually excused because the products of such willful egos seem to offer so much to their audiences - and certainly to the marketplace.

Perhaps Laub-Novak's critique could be seen as a further restatement of the form/content (materials/artist) dynamic. Getting lost in the process, letting the materials dictate some of the creative decisions, I think, greatly guarantees a work's success, just as letting the form embody the content produces a more unified piece. Failure comes when, as Laub-Novak warns, the euphoria becomes the goal. The notion of orthopraxis provides a possible resolution to

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[36]Ben Shahn, **The Shape of Content.** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 70.

[37]Karen Laub-Novak, "The Art of Deception" in **Art, Creativity, and the Sacred.** Edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1989), pp. 20-21.

such a pitfall. Serious reflection on work completed (or even in progress) removes an artist from the intoxication of creating, and insures a distinction between the quest and the work.

I am aware of trying to work within this balance as I re-examine these triptychs and find myself **thinking** about **painting** my next one. And so I work to find time for the "sacred place" of my studio, ever anxious that "something eventually will happen."

ILLUSTRATIONS

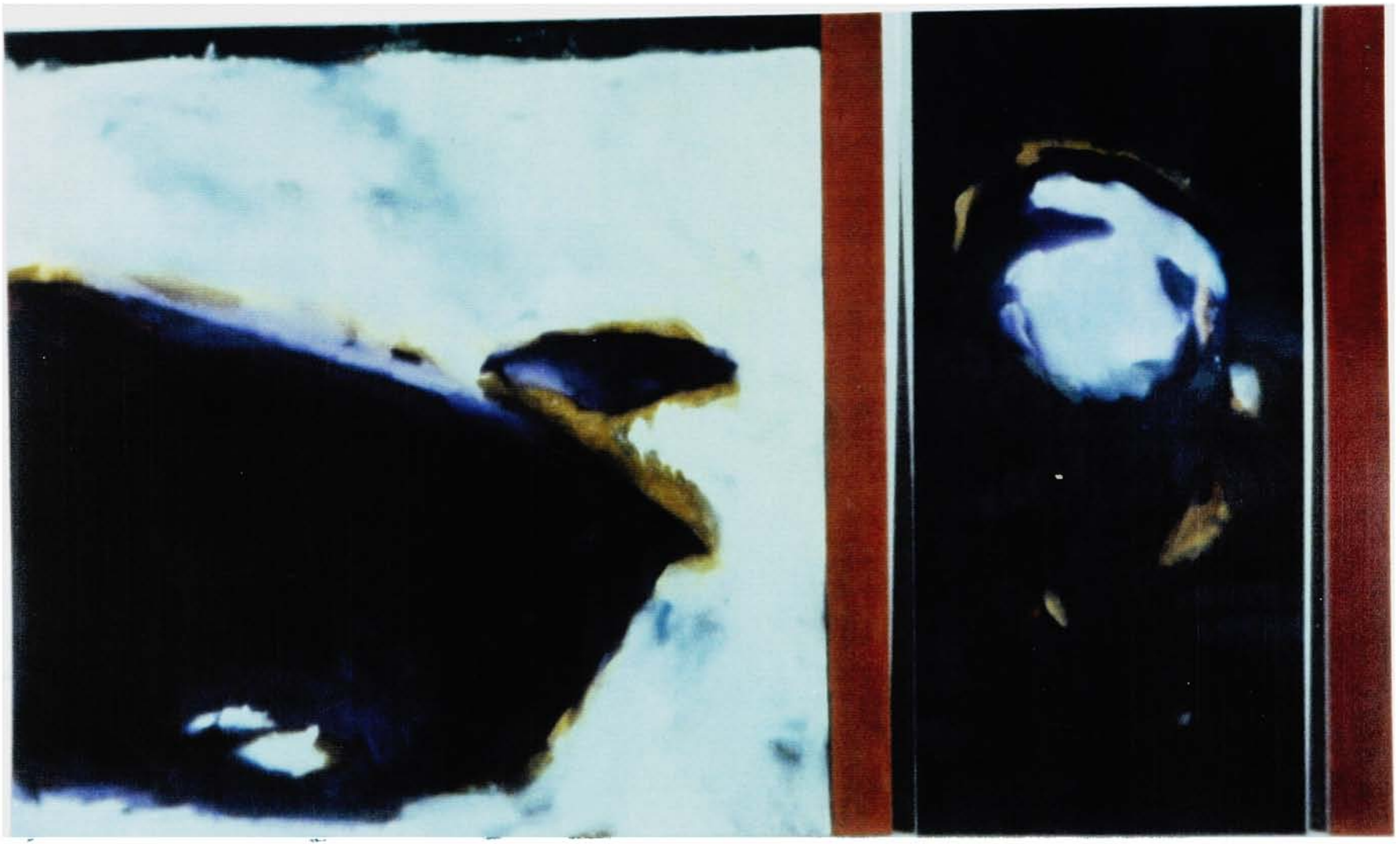

Figure 1 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs I** (Final version), oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 117 1/4"

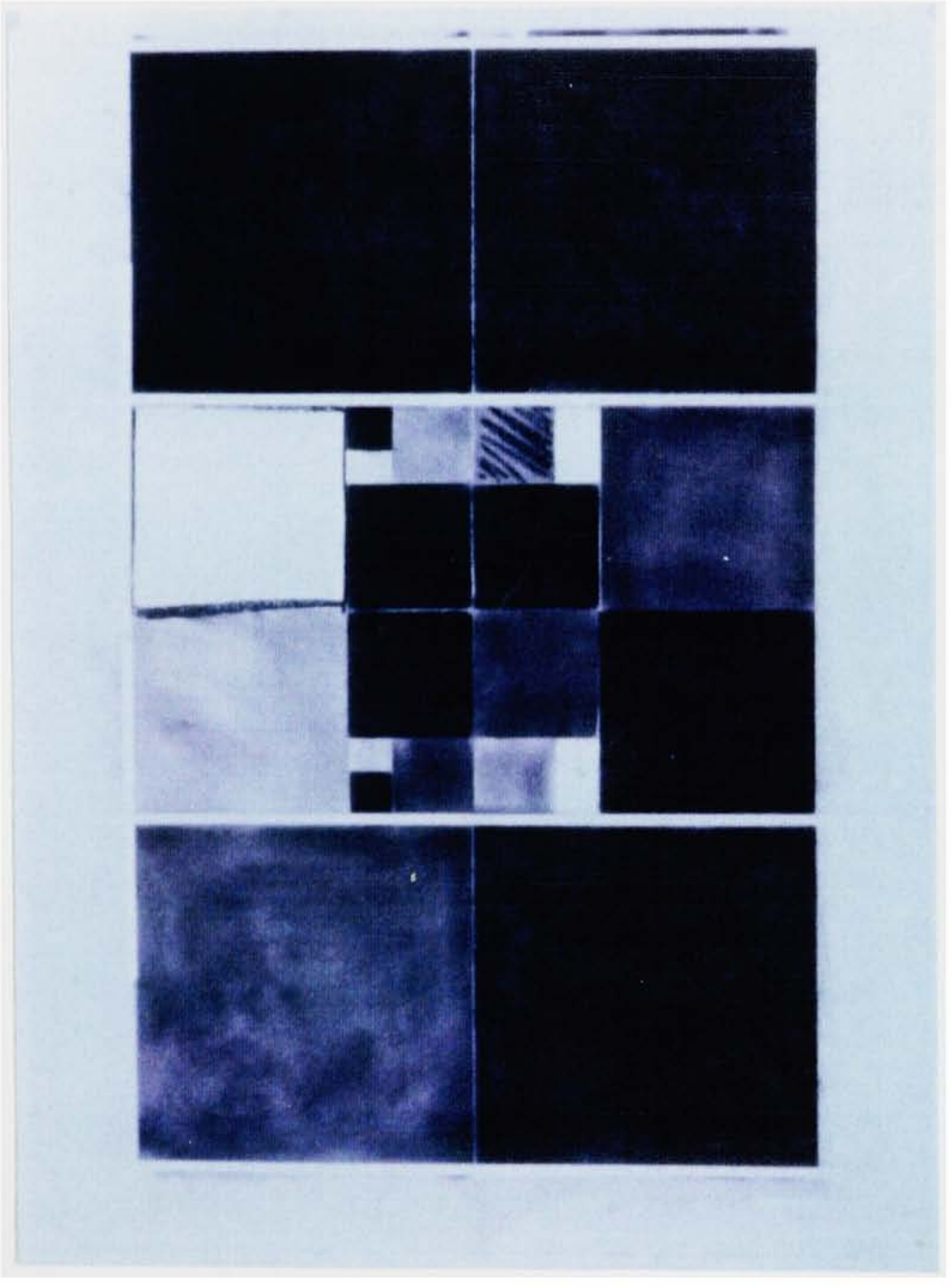

Figure 2a **Proportional Study**, charcoal on paper, 30" x 22"

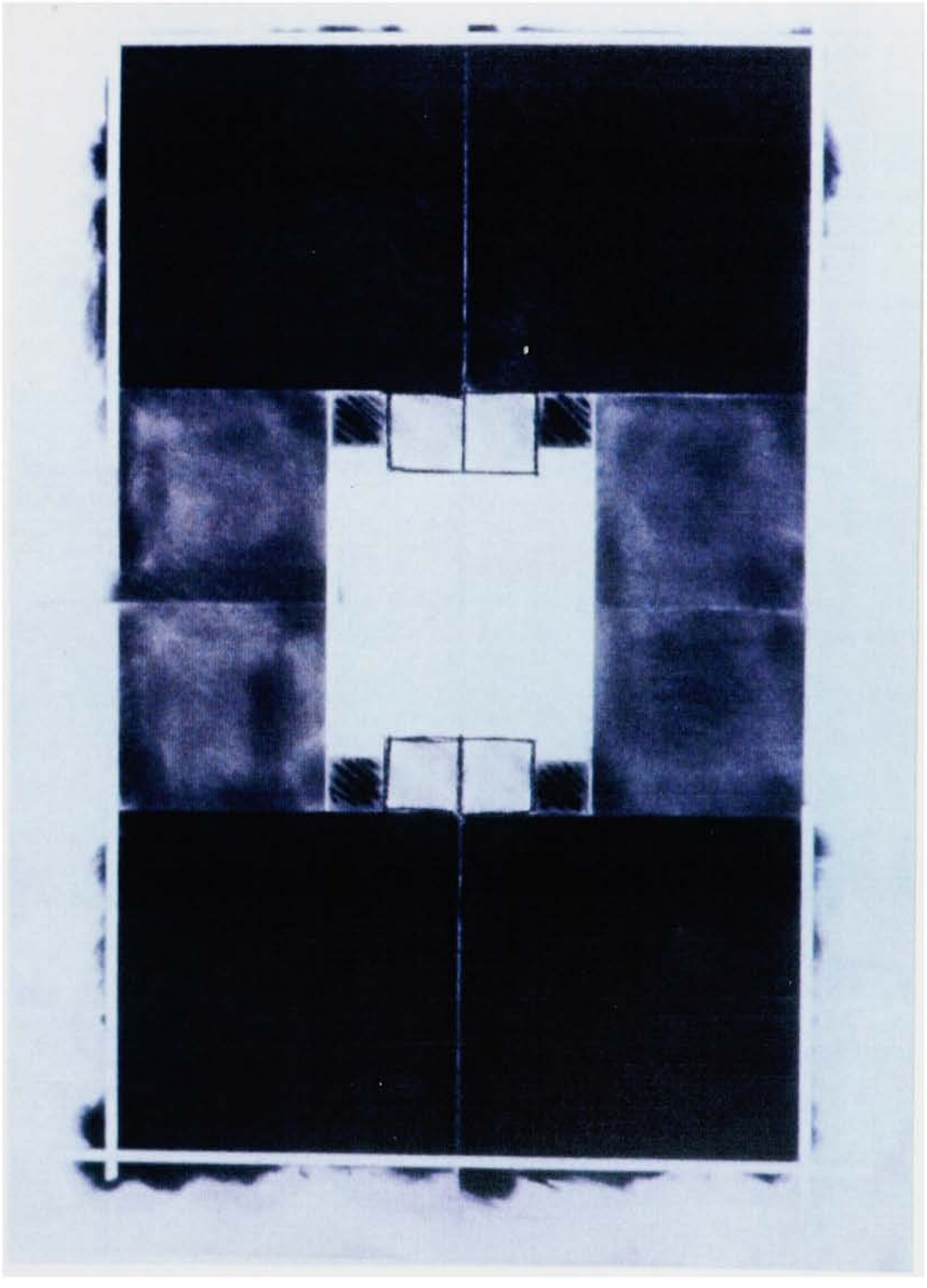

Figure 2b **Proportional Study**, charcoal on paper, 30" x 22"

Figure 3 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs I** (First version), oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 117 1/4"

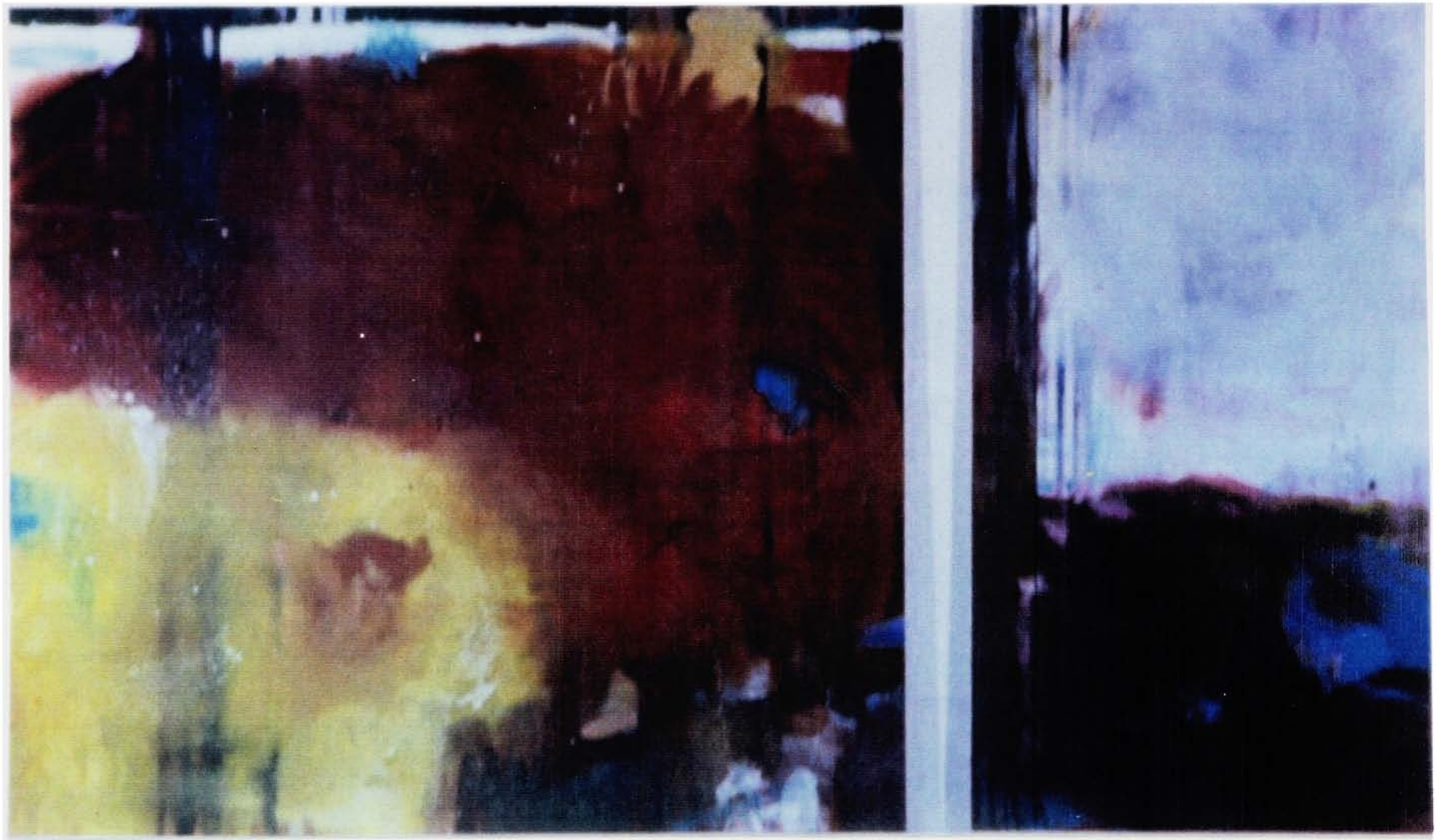

Figure 4 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs II**, oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 113 1/4"

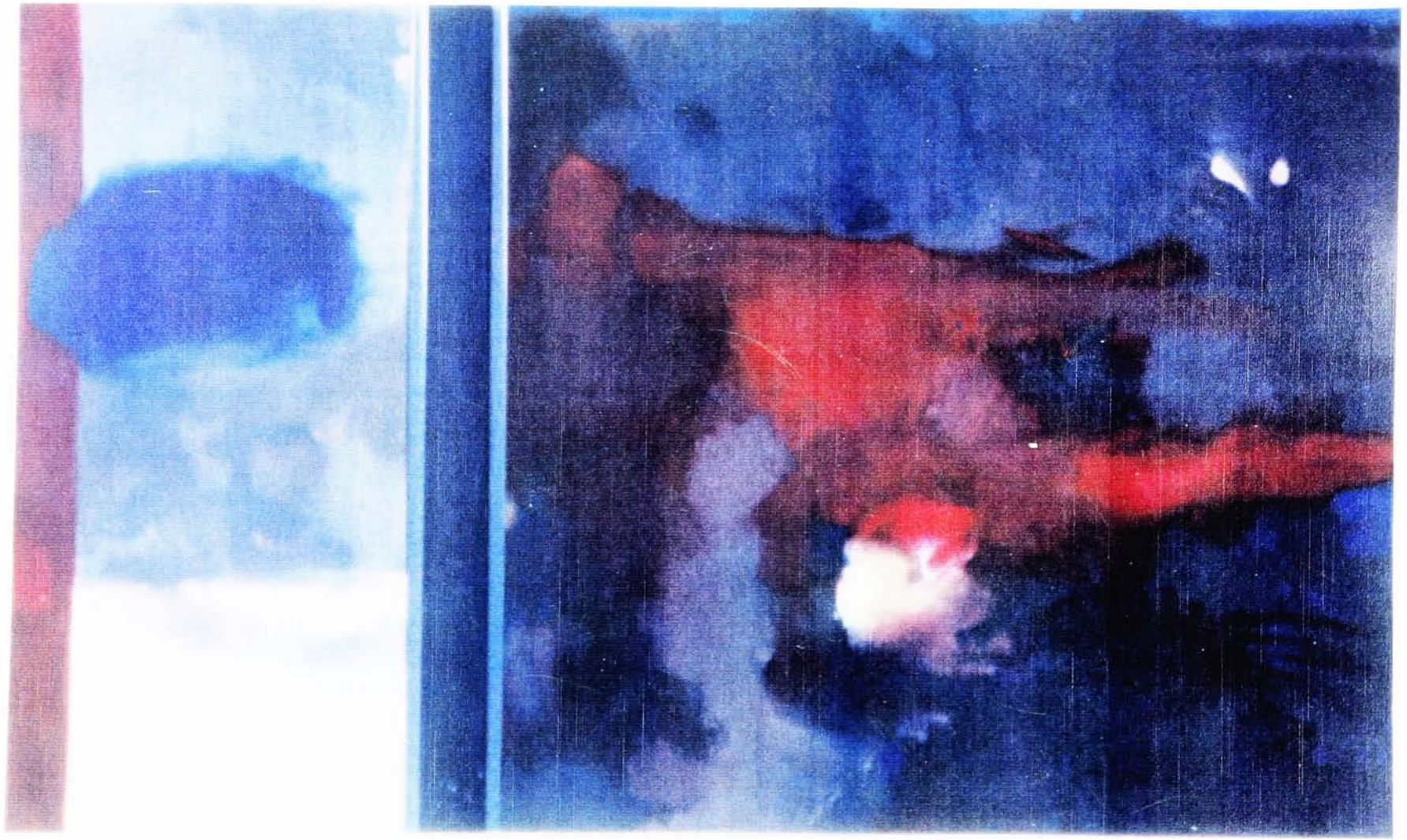

Figure 5 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs III** (First version), oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 110 1/4"

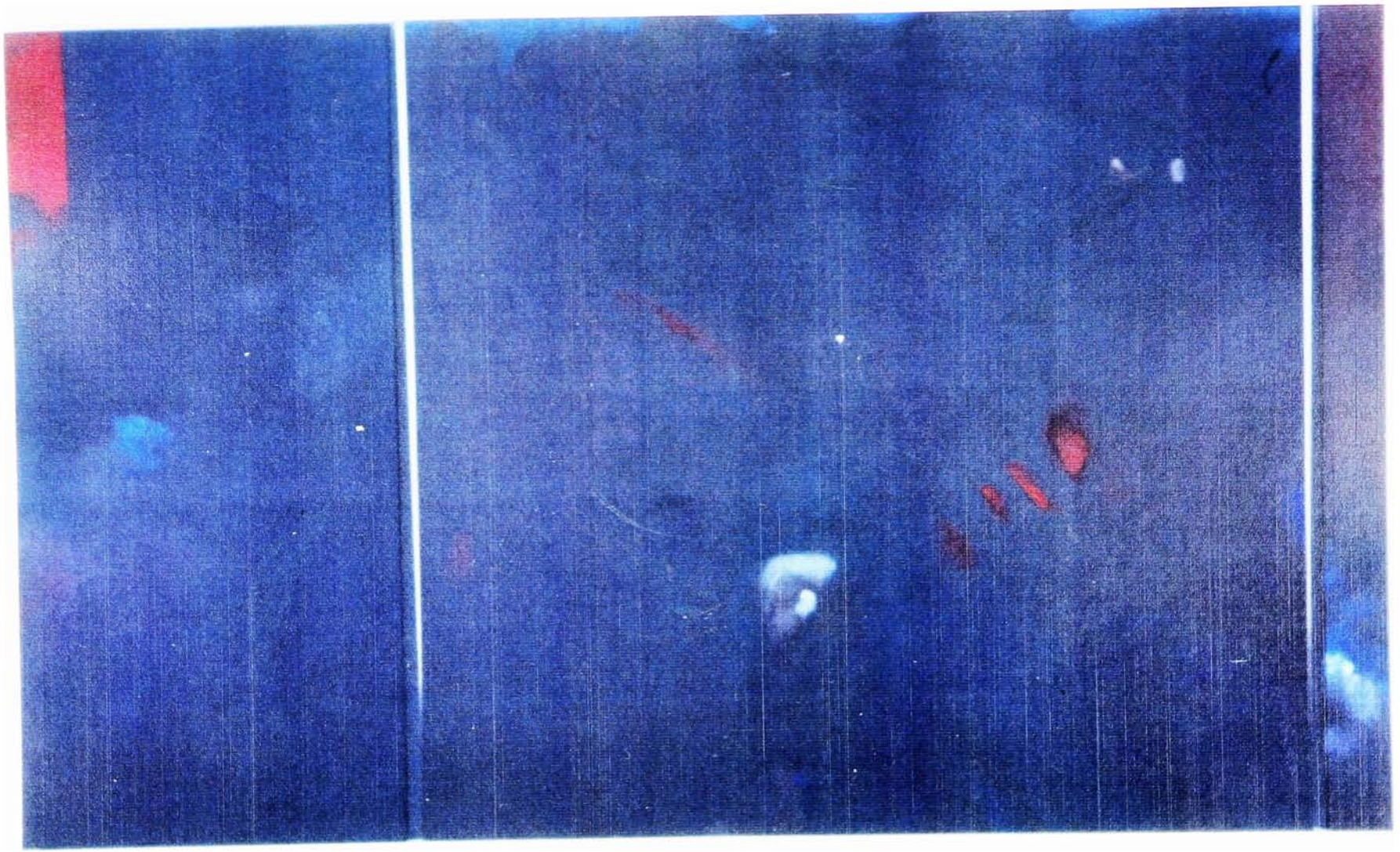

Figure 6 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs III** (Final version), oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 110 1/4"

Figure 7 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs VI**, oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 116 1/4"

Figure 8 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs VII**, oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 115 1/4"

Figure 9 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs IV**, oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 117 1/4"

Figure 10 - **Dusk Study IV**, mixed media collage on paper, 22" x 30"

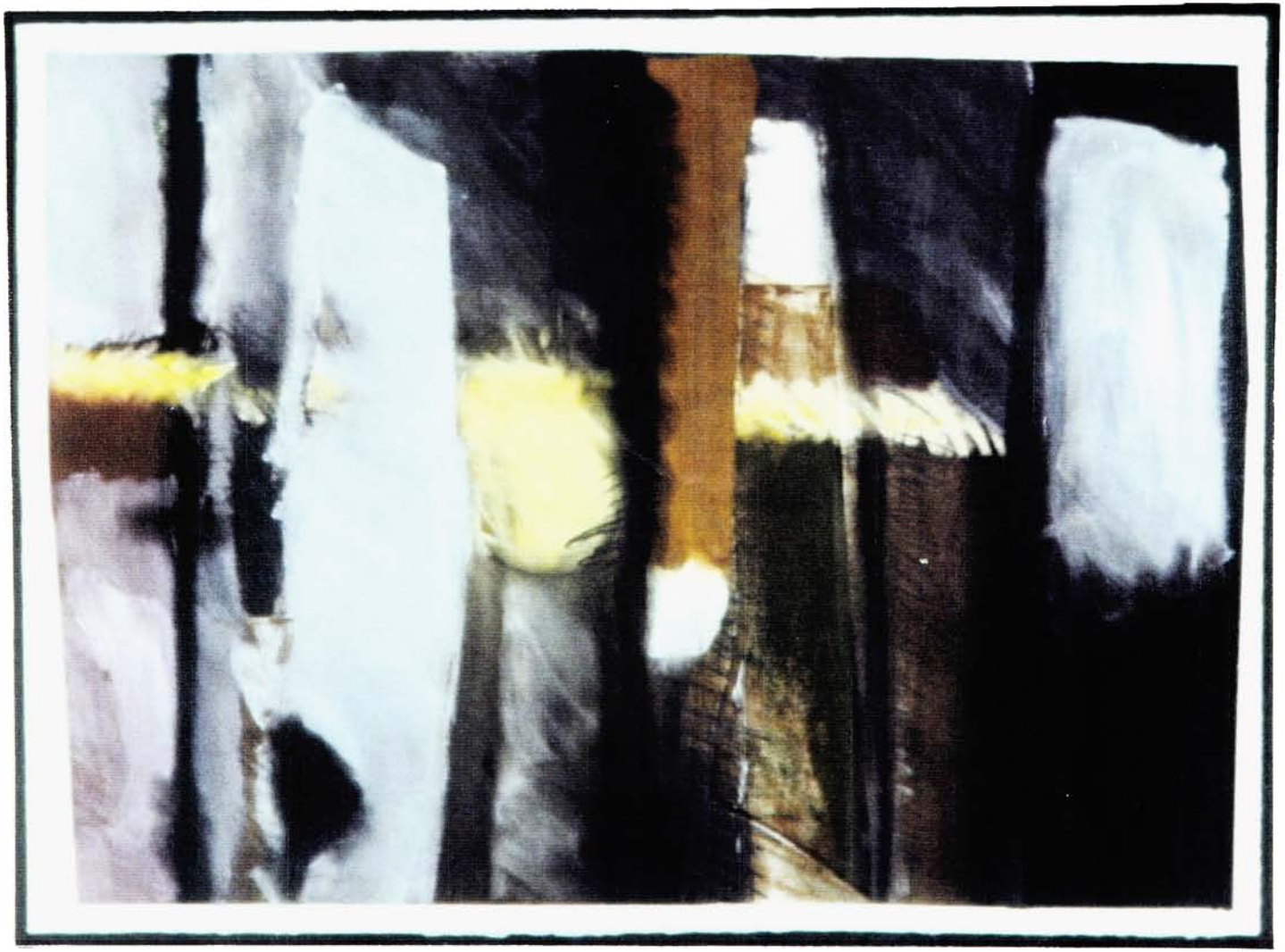

Figure 11 - **Dusk Study VII**, mixed media collage on paper, 22" x 30"

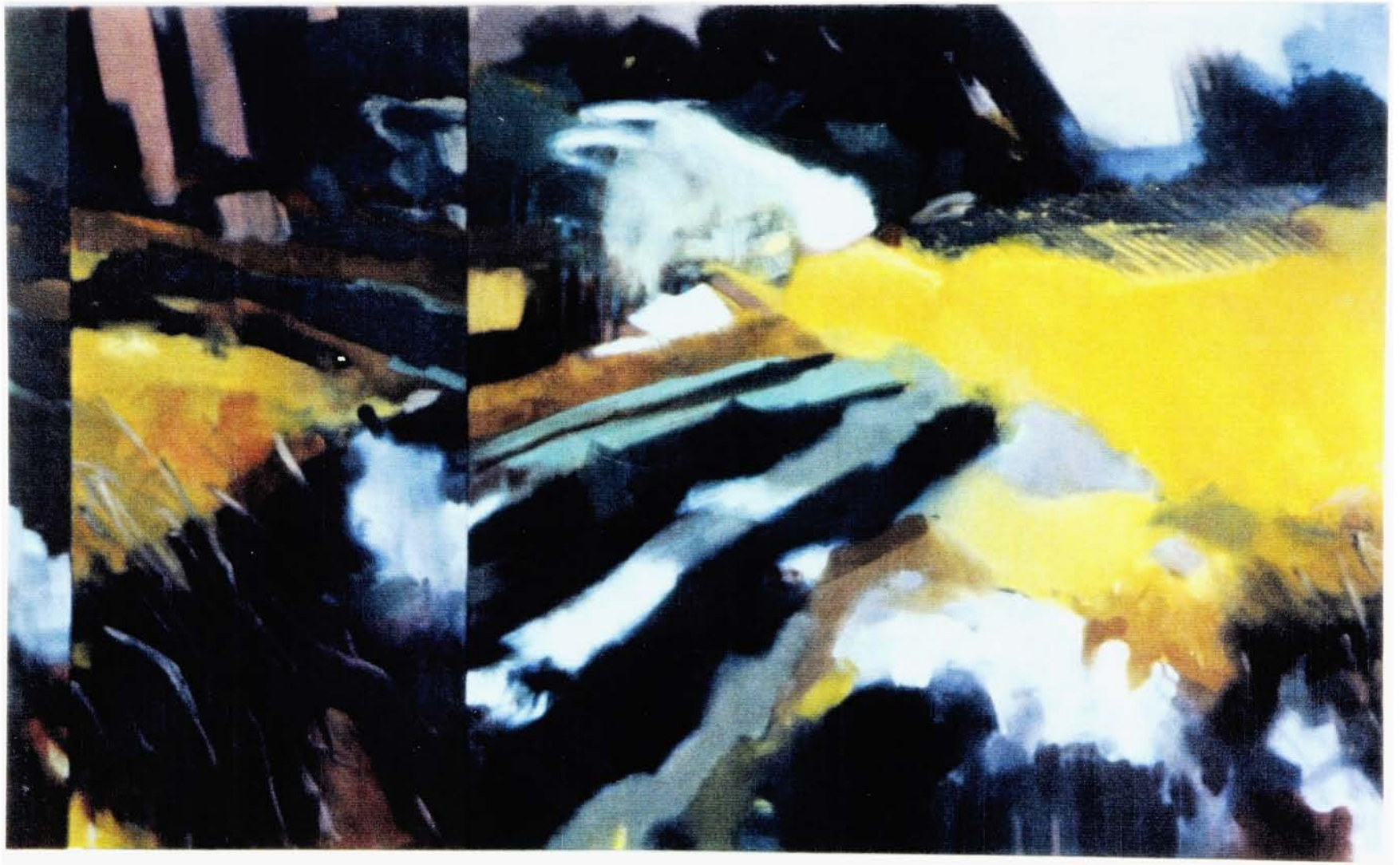

Figure 12 - **Dusk Informs Our Designs** V, oil on canvas, 66 1/4" x 107 1/4"

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